**(Job 95106) C&A S01E04 MASTERED**

(I: Interviewer, P: Participant)

I: Before we begin, we’d like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land that we’re recording on. The Worrandri Woolen Clan and Tongan people and give our respects to their elders, past, present and emerging. We encourage everyone listening to consider the traditional owners of the land that they are living and thriving on and consider the benefits that may come from a treaty with the First Peoples. This is, was and always will be Aboriginal land. [Music]

I: Andy Jackson is an Australian poet renowned for his exploration of themes such as embodiment, bodily difference and solidarity. Jackson’s first poetry collection amount the regulars was short listed for the 2011 Kenneth Slessor prize for poetry. His subsequent collections, include The Thin Bridge which won the Whitmore Press Manuscript Prize and Immune Systems. A semi-fictional first novella on Medical Tourism. In 2021 he published Human Booking. A collection of autobiographical and biographical poems that won both the ALS Gold Medal and the Prime Minister’s Literary award for poetry. In 2024 Andy co-edited Raging Grace, Australian Writers speak out on disability. An anthology which features contributions from various Australian writers addressing disability and aiming to broaden the representation and understanding of disabled experiences in Literature. Hi Andy.

P: Hey Nicole, great to be here, thanks for inviting me.

I: That’s a very impressive bio.

P: I’m almost impressed now like hearing it. I sort of forget sometimes about the long story, you know, yeah, it’s kind of nice hearing it.

I: You describe yourself as a doctor of philosophy and bodily otherness. If people were to meet you what otherness would they see?

P: Oh, that’s a good one, I think different people see different things obviously, but in terms of my physically, I have a condition called Marfan Syndrome that makes me tall and thin, which is one thing people notice straightaway. But also, I have quite noticeable spinal curvature. That’s because Marfan Syndrome is a condition of connective tissue and for some of us with that condition that results in, yeah, what you might call deformity or just bodily difference, like you said before. So, people notice that the most obvious thing and of course they make all sorts of assumptions about what that experience is like for me. Yeah, that’s probably why I started getting very interested in writing and yeah, ended up getting a Doctor of Philosophy, a PhD.

I: Can you tell me about some of those experiences of what people have thought it means for you.

P: Yeah, it’s the whole range right. Like sometimes it could be, you know, you might be walking along a street, and a stranger will drive past in the car and shout something at you because you look different, so therefore you must be kind of lower on the pecking order of humans or of man, right. So, that can happen. On the other hand, sometimes you get people who congratulate you for getting out of the house or doing your shopping, which always feels kind of weird to me because it’s really not that difficult. I think probably within that is a kind of maybe an assumption that I must have a lot of pain, and I certainly do get that assumption from people.

Like they might want to come up and tell me their story about what they experience, what they’re going through, which is usually not what I’ve gone through. I do certainly reckon with pain, but not very, it’s not high on the ranking for me. For me it’s mostly about fatigue and it’s also kind of dealing with this sense of feeling different in my body because I’m more noticeable, I stand out. So, it’s hard to be camouflaged or be invisible.

I: You also stand out with your amazing words and I’m looking at you now and I can see in the exciting load of books behind you, can you tell me when you first discovered the power of words?

P: Yeah, I don’t know if I could trace back to a particular moment. Like I was always reading as a kid, I started reading really young, my mum tells me that one day when she came to pick me up from kindergarten, I was there reading stories to the other kids, so I was kind of always interested in words and reading. In terms of writing, that was a really slow build. I think when I was a teenager and also even my 20s I would write things in journals and little exercise books, and I would never show it to anyone. So, I think I’ve just kind of always been interested in what language can do.

Like we know it can be a weapon, it can be cruel, but it can also be really insightful, and it helps us feel oriented in the world, like we know who we are, we know who we are connected to, we know the land that we’re on. Language just does something very powerful to our sense of community I think and that’s why I’ve always been connected to it.

I: Was it a conscious decision, because now you write a lot about your disability or your otherness or how other people perceive you, was it a conscious decision to write about that or was it just a case of write what you know?

P: Yeah, a bit of both right. I think at the core of it, I think I was really drawn to write because of my difference, because of how other people see me. So, I think what that did to me is make me feel very self-conscious and also mystified. Like why do people make those assumptions, why do people think that one bodily configuration is normal, and one is not normal. Why is it that people make certain assumptions about certain kinds of bodies, what are the associations, why and how do I perhaps shift that a little bit. So, I’ve always been really fascinated by that and almost like I needed to say something, I needed to write something in order to give myself some kind of, I think it’s like a counterbalance to what I’ve been receiving back.

Now part of it is like maybe you’re contradicting the assumptions that people have in what you write, but sometimes it’s also like swerving away from them, you know, like a balk that a football player might do to kind of go the other way that people don’t expect. Because I think mostly our lives as people who are disabled are complex and mundane and interesting and strange and also normal and all those sort of things.

I: I think for me, a lot of the time when I write, I don’t get comments so much on what I write that’s different, I get comments on what I write that’s the same. That people didn’t realise would be the same for me. The amount of people who think that I sleep in my wheelchair and just stay in here 24 hours a day. I’m like, no, I have a bed, I go to bed, just like the rest of you. Yeah, so I find that I actually get more comments on the similarities rather than the differences.

P: No, I think that’s the same for me to a degree. You know, like I think people are kind of, “Oh I didn’t realise that, oh that’s interesting”, thinking about the differences but also thinking about the similarities. I’ve always felt that it’s something unique about being disabled or being different that really does affect your consciousness and who you are. But, at the same time, there is not a really clear line between like us and them. You know, like we’re all kind of, we’ve got some relationship to the body that is connected to being different and being vulnerable and connected to each other.

Yeah, I think that’s why, I think we all, everybody has that kind of sense of what it might feel like or how we move through our day is always encumbered by some difficulty, whether we are disabled or not, you know, we are moving through the same world.

I: Can you tell me, because listeners to the Podcast would know that I’ve always found poetry very impressive because it’s just elusive to me. I’ve tried my hand at writing it, and I just can’t seem to get it. So, why poetry as your method of writing?

P: Yeah part of it is it’s short and partly that’s like you can spend a few hours broken up into multiple times and work over a couple of weeks. You might just be working for a short period of time and suddenly you’ve got a finished poem. Like a work of art, a song, a beautiful thing. Whereas, you know, if I was going to write a novel, you can be there for years trying to get that thing done. There is that short element, but it’s also like, I think for the poetry that I write and the poetry that I love reading, it can go somewhere very deep, very quickly. You don’t have to work up to it, you don’t have to explain yourself, you don’t have to have a lot of footnotes that justify everything you just go straight there. Yeah, and to me it’s just a really potent form of writing that to me feels like the most intimate you can get with a writer is to read their poem.

I read a quote just yesterday. I’m going to read this. An academic Timothy Hampton said that a poem is a tool of a cultivation of judgement which sounded really kind of serious, but like it kind of is for me. Like it’s not judgement in the sense of condemning something, but judgement like discernment. So, you put stuff into a poem, some weird feeling you’ve had or an experience and then you put something else in it and then something else and before you know it you’ve got all these things affecting each other and you discover something new, you learn something in the writing that you wouldn’t be able to learn by coming up with a story or writing a non-fiction book. It’s really different. It’s a bit more like music and I just, yeah, I’ve been doing it for a long time now and I can’t imagine stopping.

I: I’ve heard you say that one of the magical elements of poetry as well is the community that it brings and reading it out loud and having a really communal experience. Can you just tell me a little bit about how you find reading poetry out loud.

P: Yeah, that’s really how I got into poetry to be honest. A good friend of mine wanted to go to an open mike night and wanted to write a book of poems or like short little poem-like things and she didn’t want to do it by herself, so she dragged me along and I had a go. It was terrifying, it was really hard. It’s hard to describe how, I guess this is the other side of that thing of it’s such an intimate piece of writing, that when you get up in front of other people and say something that is deeply personal, even if what you are talking about is not personal, it’s the language is very intimate to you so, and it’s vulnerable. You feel like, “Am I getting it right? Are they going to like it.”

So, yeah, it’s terrifying, but pretty soon after that I realised was that everyone who is reading poetry out has a very similar experience unless they’ve got a massive ego, which is not many people, but most of us are just as nervous as the others and not sure about, you know, how the words are landing in our audience. So, there is overwhelmingly, you know, there are some issues in the poetry community, but overwhelmingly it is supportive community. People do applaud each other and buy each other’s books and listen and pay attention and pay tribute to each other. You know, it’s that thing about being in a room together, we pick up on each other’s energy.

For me being someone who probably for a lot of my life felt like the meaning of who I was, was people’s perception of my body. To be a poet means that it’s also, I’ll never defeat that body stuff, and I don’t want to, it’s also about who I am as a person and a thinker and there is a possibility that my words might be a bridge between people, and they can commune with each other in some way. I just find, yeah, that capacity of poetry to bring people together, not in a way that measures our difference or that solves everything, but it just allows people to spend time together and just be conscious of our shared humanness and the world we share together. That’s kind of where that comes from for me, it’s beautiful.

I: I feel like, while we are talking about, it would be remiss of me not to ask you if you would mind reading one of your own poems and if you could read it and explain a bit of context around what you are going to read, that would be good.

P: Yeah absolutely, so I’ve thought about this for a while. It’s so hard sometimes, like choosing a poem, I’ve written a lot of them. But I wanted to read a poem called formity, which is obviously a play on the word deformity. This one is in my most recent book, Human Looking. Half of the poem are quotes from a writer from 18th century, called William Hay. William Hay wrote an essay called Deformity where he talks about what it’s like for him having physical difference and how people react to him. What effect it’s had on his sense of self and his sense of being a man I think as well. Yeah, all the different ideas around it. Like it’s the 18th century and I read this essay, and I realised, that is so similar to what I’ve gone through. It just felt amazing to me.

For a long time, I wasn’t sure how to respond to this essay, but at one point I just sort of thought, well what if I laid out some of my favourite lines and left a gap between those lines and wrote my own lines in-between them. It’s a kind of, I weave them together, you know, like two strands and one after the other. So, it’s like you get two voices at once or it alternates between them and occasionally maybe it feels like it’s one voice, that maybe we are the one person across different eras. So, I really enjoyed writing this poem, it was a real surprise to me. I’ve loved playing with other people’s language as well and trying to see what we might have in common. That’s where this poem comes from. So, yeah maybe I’ll read it now. It’s called Formity.

Imagine a print of me in the frontispiece

Or a proliferating me in the ether

I am indeed a perfect riddle

The disfigured can’t be figured

Cannot look with proper confidence in the face of another

You don’t quite know what it’s like

Out of tenderness they taught me to be ashamed

What else might explain this awkwardness of my outward get-up and behaviour

This dream of entering the body of another

Ever conscious, what an untoward subject does

To the atmosphere in a room or a poem

I feel a reluctance in opening my mouth

Who knows what might come out or in

A deformed person should not assume borrowed feathers

Or that language can speak louder than flesh

Contempt attends him like his shadow

Reminding him of his ill figure

As if to figure was not also to think

When I die, I care not what becomes of this carcass

While I live let me care what becomes of you

I desire my body might be opened as these words are open

And never fixed

And I’m a good subject of speculation

For all in me is nature

An image blurred against the retina

In the Pleasure of one escaped.

I: Wow.

P: Thank you.

I: That does, in a lot of ways, when I’m hearing it like just one voice, so that’s amazing.

P: Yeah, yeah, thank you. Yeah, I wanted to kind of choose some lines of his that could potentially be like an unfinished sentence that I could finish or that maybe my words could be the beginning of a sentence that he would finish. I just loved to, there was so much in it I loved. I love that he says, “For all in me is nature”, you know, however you conceive of where we come from, this is part of being alive, being different is part of the full spectrum of every kind of being. There is so much in it that I love, I just felt like I wanted to collaborate with him, you know. And maybe also that people will read it and go, “Oh who is that person” and might look over your essay and do some more thinking.

I: I might be picking up on something that isn’t there, which is fine, but you’ve mentioned a few times about being a man with a bodily otherness, is there something about masculinity and the body that you think about that you can comment on?

P: Yeah, for sure. I’ve been working up to writing an essay on this, so I’ve been doing some reading, thinking. But it’s probably always been a bit of a minor theme in my poetry as well. I think there is something about the whole division between disabled and nondisabled, is like a binary where the disabled are kind of the unacceptable version of the nondisabled. I think sometimes, masculinity is very much set up as a binary like that too, where if you conform to it, if you’re confident, physically strong, act with a sense of entitlement, all those things, if they apply to you then you are the acceptable version of what that is.

If you can’t do that then somehow you are a suspect, whether you are a queer or puny or, you know, sensitive, any of those things make you a kind of lesser, and sometimes I think those two binaries team up together. So, if you are disabled and a man who is sensitive then that’s a kind of double problem. And of course, the other side of that binary is, there is a different implication or different results and different experiences for women who are disabled, different experiences for Indigenous folk who are disabled.

Some of these kind of double negatives can become triple negatives, and I think I’m just really curious for me about always, when I was growing up, feeling like I didn’t quite fit into, I didn’t fit into the nondisabled world, and I didn’t really fit into the kind of typical masculine world either. So, I’m still thinking through what it means to, what does that mean to not fit in, you know, and how do we either make those categories bigger and better or how do we actually start making them less significant.

I: Or, how do we feel okay with not fitting in if that’s the answer.

P: Yeah, exactly, exactly. So, you know, I think there is that two sides of it, so like but it’s the work that we do for ourselves about how do we, yeah, how do we go through this world as it is and deal with this marginality and yeah, whatever the word is, whether it’s acceptance or pride or just enduring the matter of fact being human. Or so there is that side, but I think the other side is what can we do collectively to shift the ideas that reinforce those really horrible set of prejudices around all sorts of people. That’s a much longer, much harder task that we’ve got, and we can only address that collectively.

I: You said that you were thinking about that and thinking about whether to write an essay on it, do you have a creative process in terms of what happens, once you start thinking about something, how does a project start?

P: Yeah, sometimes it’s, I thought about it, so I feel like there’s no one formula or one method that I really have. For a while there, in the last couple of years, a few times there’s been long stretches, weeks, months, where I’ve not written anything, no poems, not even a sentence, just not written for all sorts of reasons. Almost always if I have the thought, “Oh I’m not writing, what’s going on?”, something comes up and somehow I start writing again. I think over the course of my life I’ve been, I’m a writer who responds to things and I think what that means is that I have to have an experience, or I have to read something or encounter something or remember something that causes me to feel like I need to write something.

That need, it’s hard to know when you cross that threshold or not. Even when you do cross it and then you start to write something, it doesn’t always work out. We are looking I think, as writers to be surprised by ourselves, to find sort of some gold among the dirt and do something that, “Oh I didn’t think that was there”, and sometimes you just can’t find it. So, it doesn’t work and maybe you try something else. You try a different poetic form, or you might mix up the language a bit and sometimes it works, you discover it. Other times it just doesn’t.

I think I’ve learned over the years, because I’ve tried various different techniques and poetic forms, yeah, there isn’t any one formula for me. I think I just need to get, to cross a certain threshold of curiosity and connection. Connecting up with the issue or the person or the experience that has occurred to me. Yeah, it’s a mystery which is one of the beautiful things about it.

I: Do you always have faith, even if you haven’t written, that something is going to come, or is there is a sense of imposter syndrome?

P: Probably anyone who is alive, but anyone who is a poet certainly has some version of imposter syndrome. It is always there like sitting on your shoulder, saying, “No, you don’t really know what you are doing, they are going to find you out eventually” or “You are going to run out of poems”. Mostly what’s involved is kind of ignoring it and keeping going and eventually at some point you do kind of, you find a poem that you are searching for, or you find a different poem that you weren’t searching for, that is actually there. Or the other possibility is that you don’t find anything, and you end up kind of moving on, you go, okay I’ll try something else.

The imposter syndrome for me is totally, something that has softened over the years. Once you start getting a few books out and then people start reading them and you get certain grants or prizes or, you know, you start going, hang on maybe I know something about it. But it never goes away. It never goes away because I think you can never totally take responsibility for what you are doing either because it’s this mercurial, unpredictable thing. So, the sense is always there that I’ve never been in control of it, I’m not in control of it now and I hope it keeps going. I’m pretty sure it will, but hey yeah, you never know.

I: If it doesn’t, you’ve got a pretty good backlog at the moment to keep you going for a while.

P: (laugh) Yeah, I think so, I can always look through the pile of discarded poems and make something out of them.

I: Does that happen often that you put something aside and then come back to it and be able to finish it?

P: I always tell people who I’m teaching or mentoring that they should do that because it helps us to be able to let go of them. We feel like sometimes you’ve got a poem with one good phrase in it and the rest of it is terrible and you think, I can’t throw it away. So, I always tell people, just put it to the side, put it in a folder somewhere and go back to it later on. So, I do that myself, I would say nine times out of ten, maybe 99 times out of 100, when I go back to it I go, no I don’t like it. So, it’s probably for me yeah, just a device to kind of allow myself to move on.

I: Can you tell me, just going back, I’m going to sound like a psychologist here, going all the way back, can you tell me about, Among The Regulars.

P: Well yeah, as you mentioned at the very start, that was my first book. Well, I had published a few little self-published little chat books, little printed things before that. But this was my first ever book put out by a publisher and weirdly they actually approached me and asked if I had enough poems for a collection. So, I wasn’t even thinking about it too much, but yeah, I’ve had some poems published in journals here and there and Paper Tiger, which doesn’t exist anymore, but that publisher came and said, we’re just setting this press up and we’d like to put a book of yours out.

So, I always say to people, just put your poems out into journals, put them online, go to readings, you never know, you will be noticed, the more you just put yourself out there. But that book, when I look at it now, it has a lot in common with all of my books I think. I think I always think, “Oh, that must have been really different back then, I must have been doing something really immature or not, just kind of self oriented. But it’s actually not. I looked at it the other day and realised that the themes that are in there are also playing out in recent work. So, there is stuff about my own embodiment and my own sense of self. There is poems in there that are also imagining other people’s lives and sort of looking for affinity or solidarity with them.

There is poems about family, there is poems about sort of memory in childhood, poems about difference in general and how other people who are marked as being different for all sorts of reasons resist that imposition and live a life that is really strong. So, there is all sorts of themes that have always been there, and they were from the beginning which is sort of interesting to notice.

I: I feel like, especially with poetry, as you said, you can go deep really quickly, as somebody who hasn’t felt like they fit in, it must be very vulnerable to have your deepest, darkest thoughts published.

P: Yeah it’s so funny. I think when you are in that process of wanting to write something and wanting to explore something or try to find out where you are in the world by using language and writing a poem, when you’ve got that sort of urgency to is, actually not thinking about the audience or the readership. I’ve had times when I’ve written things and I’ve thought, yeah, this is good, I’ll send it out and then when it's published you go, oh wow that actually, I said that? Yeah, okay. So yeah, you don’t always realise how big it is until you are there. Even when you are reading in public, you just, you get up and read because that’s what people do, and you’ve written something that you are committed to, so you read it.

Afterwards you go, oh wow, that was actually really personal, and I think it’s probably good that I don’t think about it too much. I think it means that it puts me up there and it means that I can say things that other people will connect with, without double guessing myself or second guessing myself, I can just do it.

I: It’s obviously from letting fear get in the way, I guess.

P: Yeah exactly, exactly. Of course there is always this hesitancy and you do, maybe not consciously but in your body you realise what you are doing. So, when there is a live reading, I often feel, even now still, nervous to some degree. But I try to kind of just accept that that is what it is and to allow that nervousness to be part of the energy of my voice, so that what comes across is the truth that this is important. This sort of subliminal sense that, oh hang on, yeah, this is not just a kind of formal exercise in arranging words next to each other this is something that matters. I love when I go to a poetry reading and I get that sense from someone that what they are saying really matters, not just to them but also to us. So, yeah, I think some kind of nervousness or stress or uncertainty, it comes with the territory, but it’s also really useful.

I: Speaking of poetry events, I recently saw you at the Raging Grace launch in Readings, can you tell me how Raging Grace came about?

P: Yeah, at the end of 2021 RMIT had a call out. They’ve got an organisation within the RMIT called the Health Transformation Lab and they’re really interested in trying to come up with innovative ideas around healthcare. Sometimes using technology, but other times really just thinking about how systems work together, and they had this idea that they really need creative thinkers to get in and do some creative thinking and writing about healthcare. So I was like mm. they were setting up like a six-month fellowship where, you know, you would apply with your idea about what you wanted to do in that period and they would, yeah, you would basically get the resources of the land also get some financial support.

So, at that time, this was back in 2021, this was after the kind of black summer that we’d had the year before. This was while we were just starting to come out of lockdowns in Victoria. All these things were in the background for me, and I was very much aware of that, my own, disabled people were significantly affected by both of those events, pandemic and the climate disasters. So, I was just doing a lot of thinking about it and feeling like, if you want to change healthcare systems that I think you really need the voices of disabled people.

When I started thinking that I realised straightaway that this was not something I could do by myself. For one thing I’m certainly no expert in what other disabled people need. I don’t know, I know a few things but there is such limit to what I know. So, my idea that I proposed was to bring together at least 20 different writers and have conversations and write together collaboratively and come up with poems and essays that explore, well they phrased it as the future of health and that’s certainly how we phrased it. But really health in the really, really broadest sense, not just, you know, doctors and hospitals, but what does it mean to feel like your life is connected to other lives and your life is worth living and you’re able to do what you want to do.

So, that was the idea. Raging Grace, is the collection of writing that came out of those workshops that happened in 2022. There was more writing that happened after that and it accumulated and before we knew it yeah, there was just this whole book of writing that was just even, just a hundred times better than I imagined. This is also one of those experiences where you, just like getting up to read a poem, you don’t realise it’s what you are doing until you are in it and then you go, “Oh wow this is amazing”. I’ve just got such great gratitude and admiration for all the writers in that book, it’s wonderful.

I: While it is very important, I’m imagining at times it was also very confronting, how do you make sure that you are in a space where the memories or the experiences that you’re writing down are okay to be written down?

P: Yeah, it’s a great question. Again, I think there is no formula. But for me in this process, what we did, there were complete kind of, three different groups. Two of them are online and one of them was in person and the strategies were a little different for both. But what they had in common, I think, was that we just had conversations together about really important things and in those conversations, we just listened to each other. We tried to frame it so that there was a session that was about kind of what’s wrong with the world at the moment. Then another session on what could be different.

So, we tried to kind of have both sides of it, so it wasn’t just venting but it was also like, hang on, I’ve had a taste of something good here, what if we enlarged that. Or gee I’d really love it if this could be possible. So, I don’t want to say it was really negative positive, it was more this sense of agency.

I: Yeah like action then hope.

P: Yeah and imagining and, you know. But the other thing that I think is really important was that when we are in a room together, even if the room is virtual and we’re all talking from our own experience, what we realised was that among our diversity of experience there is that sort of common thread, where you can really recognise each other’s humanity and recognise that you are both, or everyone is sort of up against the same kinds of forces and dynamics. That, as much as that’s really sobering, like it’s really hard and it’s painful and obviously, you know, people in that process were really moved and challenged, but at exactly the same time it’s also really encouraging that you are not out there by yourself.

There are other people who are like, who are going through similar things and who are there to support you, are there to encourage you and there to kind of go, if there are things that can’t be changed, to go, “Yeah, that’s shit”. You know, so we are not alone, and we keep going. So, that to me was a real guide for keeping going and knowing that what we are doing, we are on the right track and that the things that were coming out of the writing were actually worth keeping because they came out of a space, a real energy. Like they are really energetic poems and essays, didn’t come out of a kind of theoretic theme or event. Really vibrant sort of stuff.

I: It would be interesting to see if a government agency or a healthcare sector was able to use some of those stories in their policy.

P: Yeah.

I: Have you heard anything around that?

P: I know that RMIT’s health transformation lab are really trying to infiltrate some of these systems and share some of this work through some of the forums that they have. Some of the members of that lose collective have been involved in trying to connect up with hospitals and other doctors who have kind of those, I can’t remember what they are called, but they have sessions occasionally where it’s for professional development. You can come and hear someone talk and try to get some other perspectives in there as well. It’s early days and it takes a lot of effort.

Because very, ironically and this is sort of a vicious circle, a lot of people working in healthcare world are so overworked, they are really stretched and it’s very hard to reach those people to eek out a little bit of extra time to say, “Have a listen to this”. It’s not going to be something you just tick a box and you, “Oh yeah I’ve done that”. It’s something that has to seep into their way of operating. So, it’s not an easy thing. But hopefully we’ll get more opportunity to share it, and it will just, you know, slowly but surely seep out there in the world. I think there is lots of projects going on that are doing a similar thing. So, that’s the hope.

I: I’ve read some of it and it’s absolutely amazing, so hopefully it ends up in tangible results, tangible action, it would be great.

P: Yeah, thank you.

I: We talked a little bit before about you mentoring people, and is there anything, because you’ve been around the poetry world for a while now, just a few years, are you noticing a difference or a change in the way that poetry is perceived by the wider community?

P: Yeah, that’s a really good one. I think on the one hand, poetry is still you know, kind of marginal. Like not everybody really knows what’s going on in the poetry world, but it is actually, I feel like the one big difference is that it’s way more diverse than it was when I first started reading poems and getting published in the sort of early 2000s. Back then it was not overwhelmingly but you know, majority was sort of older men, older white men and I think there was a different tone to the work, and it was much more controlled. What I find, I think, in poetry these days in general is are way more diverse voices, not just in the identity of the people writing their poems but in their style.

I’m noticing a real sort of urgency to the writing now and a sense of defiance, a sense of, “Ah I have to write this”. It’s not a kind of hobby or an abstract thing, there is a lot of passion and a lot of experimentation, trying new things. They are not satisfied with just doing what has been done before because that’s kind of what’s partly lead to where we are now, that we haven’t had other voices come in. But when we do perhaps we can start shifting the way we see things.

I: Poetry isn’t the most financially sustainable or rewarded career and then when you add disability on top of that, there is a whole other thing, so how could society, and you can be as political or not as you want with this question. But how could society better support disabled artists?

P: That’s a fantastic question and the answer is like so big and so complex. I feel like part of it is, it’s a similar answer to how can society better support disabled people, full top, whether they are artists or not. Making sure the NDIS is fully supported and allows for the kind of autonomy of disabled people and doesn’t kind of bureaucratise their ambition. So, there is that and there’s the way the disability support pension is so, again, so bureaucratised and so difficult to get onto and such a low amount. So, some of that stuff is institutional. I think society, I’d love it if nondisabled people would step up and be just as active in campaigning and wishing for better services and for better support.

Also just to be aware of what differences disabled people face and are trying to counter that in some way on their own, not just waiting for us to do it. But also, I just feel like I’d love people to be curious about the writing and artwork and the music that we’re making and to get out and check it out because it’s probably something they would be surprised by and be like, “Oh, hang on actually this is unreal”. Yeah, so I think I just would love people to be curious about what’s going on and read as much as they can.

I: Sometimes I feel like the people that we need to come to these events are the people that I never see at those events. It would be great to have somebody who was just a stranger, didn’t know anything about disability, was just reading the paper and saw it and thought they’d come.

P: I totally agree. There is a parallel experience with poetry itself, where I’ve certainly done readings with people who said, “Oh I didn’t think I liked poetry but maybe I do”. I think it can be similar with writing by disabled people where they say, “Oh I didn’t, I thought this would be about tragedy” or “I thought this would be inspirational”, and it’s not it’s something else. It’s much more human and yeah, I totally, I think it’s an ongoing struggle right, to get people out. We’re doing what we can.

I: So, in following on from that, how could people support you?

P: Oh, well I will certainly say, yes, go for it, buy the books, there is a good handful of books out there of mine that are for sale and people can go and buy the books. Or get their library to buy the books if they can’t afford it so that it’s available for others, that kind of thing, fantastic. But you know, like in a way I don’t necessarily need so much support at the moment. I’ve been so fortunate to get where I have been. I’ve won a couple of prizes, I’ve got work at the moment. I’m employed which is amazing, I’m so surprised. But I’ve also got the sort of job where I don’t have to work full time because I can’t do that physically, so I just work 50% and that’s enough. So, I’m really lucky.

I think people can support me by supporting other disabled writers as well and supporting them, supporting the up-and-coming writers and just seeing what they love reading and supporting that. That’s what I’d like to see.

I: What’s next for you? I know we were talking before about you having certain things in your head and having that idea about masculinity and writing an essay, but what is next for you?

P: Yeah I’m in the process of writing a collection of essays in fact. So, they’re sort of a combination of autobiography and a theory and ideas and reflections on poetry and embodiment and yeah, on collaboration and yeah, a little bit, I’m hoping that essay on masculinity. But also written a long essay on the whole idea of disability shame and yeah, trying to think through that complex issue. So, yeah, that book hopefully I think I may be about halfway through. I’ve got a few more essays to write but that’s kind of the next major thing. In the background I’m just always writing poems. So, I’m sort of, more and more I’m coming up with new poems and I’ll eventually have another book in a couple of years I think if I’m lucky.

I: When something is more structured and you are going to publish it for example, do you have a mentor or somebody that you always go to to say, “What do you think of this?”

P: Yeah, look when I was developing as a writer, when I was younger, I had like a workshop group where I would bring poems to, we would all bring poems and critique each other which was so useful. On some level I’ve kind of internalised all those voices and now I’ve got all these various critique people in me sort of planning things out that work. So, I do less of that now than I used to. I’ve had mentors as well over the course of my career and they’ve been incredibly valuable. I’ve sort of internalised some of them as well. But yeah, I do share it with people who I’m close to, my drafts of poems or work. That is still really important to me. Mostly I kind of work by myself to get it to a stage where it’s close enough to share it and then it’s like okay, what tweaks do I need to do with this?

I: For me it would be really difficult to know if a poem or a piece of work is “finished”, how do you go with saying that it’s finished?

P: I think I probably stole this from someone else. You hear a little click. You kind of do, you hear this like, “Ah that’s it, it’s fallen into place”. What I would often do is read a poem out, sometimes out loud but just sometimes kind of in my head and so you kind of hear when something is a bit, oh that’s a bit off, that didn’t quite work, that tiny little bit there, so you get the thesaurus out or you cut a bit out. So, you do those little surgeries and at some point the more times you change something the less awkward it feels. But also sometimes, and recently, I’ve gotten to the point where I want to keep some of that imperfection in the poem as well, so it does sound a bit awkward and wonky because that’s us, you know, we’re all imperfect so why cut the poem being perfect. So, it’s finished I guess when you’ve done enough to it.

I: Just as a final question. It’s interesting that you’ve said about being imperfect a few times, what was your journey to accepting that? Because I’m still at the perfectionist.

P: Yeah, oh look I think we’re in a perfectionist society, so it’s very hard to completely dispel that streak within us because sometimes it’s our personality but other times it’s just that’s the world we are in. We’re in a world that’s really focused on, what is it, sort of normality, you know. Being healthy or whatever that is, being your best self, all that sort of stuff. It is a journey for me, relates to this essay that I mentioned just before about shame. It’s an ongoing journey for me, it’s never, I think it will always be unfinished. When I was younger it was so painful, like really painful.

The more I’ve written about it and the more I’ve shared those poems and writing and the more I’ve met other people with similar kind of challenges or issues that they are dealing with, the more it kind of softens. So, it’s not like it disappears, it just becomes more malleable and something you can work with and yeah, you treat it more lightly. So, it’s a matter of degree, it’s changed, but it’s still something that I deal with often.

I: I suppose, depending on what you are going through, or what the outside world is telling you, your relationship with it can change.

P: Yeah absolutely, yeah. Yeah, there are just days where you are exhausted so you can’t cope with anything and so other times when you aren’t [0:49:24 blant] and you keep going through regardless. Regardless of what’s happening. Yeah, so absolutely it changes from day to day, yeah.

I: Thank you so, so much for your time, it’s so lovely to talk to you. Thank you so much Andy Jackson for talking to me today, there will be details on how to purchase Andy’s books and support Andy in this episode’s Show Notes. Create And Amplify has been assisted by the Australian Government through Creative Australia, its Principle Arts Investment and Advisory body. Until next time.

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